



October 28, 2019

Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy  
Office of the Chancellor  
UMass Amherst  
374 Whitmore Building  
Amherst, MA 01003

Dear Chancellor Subbaswamy,

We write as chair of the Advisory Board, Executive Director, and Deputy Executive Director, respectively, of the [Academic Engagement Network \(AEN\)](#), an independent and non-partisan national organization comprised of over 700 faculty members on more than 235 campuses across the United States. AEN seeks to counter the delegitimization of Israel on campus, helps to defend campus free speech and academic freedom, promotes robust discussion of Israel in the academy, and responds to antisemitism on campus when it occurs. Prominent university leaders and distinguished scholars serve on AEN's Advisory Board, including Deborah E. Lipstadt, Steven Pinker, Jesse Fried, Lawrence H. Summers, and Stephen Joel Trachtenberg among others. In addition, a number of faculty at UMass Amherst are members of AEN.

We write to express our admiration for the [statement](#) that you released on October 21. In our judgment your statement was exactly right. You stated clearly and unequivocally what needed to be said in defense of academic freedom and free speech while also recognizing how many members of your campus community can feel alienated and left demoralized by events organized and hosted by advocates of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement who bring to the UMass Amherst campus [offensive](#) and [bigoted provocateurs](#).

What is required in these instances, and what you understand so well, is leadership—and a willingness to provide a moral compass in condemning hateful speech that is antithetical to UMass Amherst's values of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. Even racist and other prejudiced expression is constitutionally protected speech so long as there is not an immediate threat to safety. But the fact that our jurisprudence allows for such freedom of expression does not mean that this speech does not inflict injury to those so malevolently attacked.

We understand that you are now [facing reproach](#) for having issued your statement and that some, including from among your faculty, are even insisting that you retract it. In light of this ongoing pushback to your strong statement and its message of tolerance and inclusivity, we wish to provide you with our organization's full and unequivocal support.

We applaud you for reaffirming your commitment to academic freedom and reminding the campus community that UMass Amherst "remains firmly opposed to BDS and to academic boycotts of any kind." Academic boycotts are inimical to the fundamental principles and core values that define the

academy, namely open and unfettered communication of ideas and the academic freedom to conduct intellectual exchange without fear of retaliation. Your statement correctly notes how ironic and frankly [hypocritical](#) it is that the selected speakers for the upcoming high-profile pro-BDS [campus event](#) scheduled for Nov. 12 would deny the right of academic freedom to Israeli academics, even as they plan to devote their panel to raising false and overblown allegations that pro-Palestinian voices on campus are being silenced.

Further, we commend you for going beyond a defense of constitutionally protected speech to specifically highlighting how BDS promotes prejudice and hate which isolates, demeans, and marginalizes Jews, Zionists, and Israelis on your campus. Your statement correctly notes that BDS creates divisions and polarizes the campus community. From our vantage point, we are increasingly concerned that unbridled hatred of Israel is undermining the mission of the academy. In recent years, we have witnessed BDS-promoted efforts to exclude Jewish and Zionist students from participation in campus life, particularly in progressive coalitions and causes, as well as campus campaigns designed to discredit major Jewish organizations and initiatives (including Hillel, the Anti-Defamation League, and Birthright). Pro-BDS activists routinely use [tactics of disruption and intimidation](#) rather than engage in debate or dialogue with Israelis or with Jewish students who are pro-Israel. Those who speak out against virulent anti-Zionism and the demonization and delegitimization of Israel on their campuses are frequently accused of acting in bad faith and of seeking to silence legitimate criticism of Israel. There are now accumulating reports of Jewish students feeling compelled to hide their identities, from fear of being targeted as racists or white supremacists.

As you point out in your principled statement, BDS compromises educational goals by turning the complex and intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a caricature that singles out one side for blame and establishes a false binary of oppressor vs. oppressed. While many well-meaning people gravitate to BDS believing that it offers a means for advancing social justice and peace in the Middle East, the reality is that this movement is reactionary and fundamentally illiberal. In demonizing and delegitimizing Israel and any Jew who supports the right of the Jewish people to self-determination, BDS is widely regarded as denigrating the identity of Jews, the vast majority of whom self-define as Zionists. Recently released reports and analyses also reveal a disturbing link between BDS and antisemitic hate speech, by highlighting BDS activists [trafficking](#) in anti-Jewish conspiracies and tropes and canards about Jewish power and money. Nor is it the case that BDS promotes peace – indeed, it offers no peace proposals and recommends no constructive political actions or transformative projects.

In sum, we commend you for writing such a powerful statement and hope that you are not discouraged by some negative reactions and responses to it that you are now receiving. We also hope that you will use your statement as a springboard for an action plan that will work to create the inclusive environment and positive learning environment that you so strongly support. In particular, we encourage you to:

- *Fund high-profile campus speaker events that present alternative views about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* Given that pro-BDS faculty have repeatedly featured guest speakers notorious for their anti-Israel invective, the university has a responsibility to ensure that students hear from other scholars and practitioners who can expose them to a range of historical and political perspectives. Speakers should be selected with an eye toward modeling how a robust and critical discourse on Israel and Palestine can be achieved without

any group on campus feeling isolated, demoralized, or under siege. AEN faculty at UMass Amherst can play a role in recommending speakers and organizing relevant programming.

- *Hire new faculty who can ensure more pluralism in the campus curriculum about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* While pro-BDS faculty can be prevented from misusing the classroom by indoctrinating students against Israel, the most effective way to address politically-motivated teaching under conditions established by academic freedom is to hire new faculty who can help to cultivate greater diversity in course content.
- *Establish and institute an antisemitism training program for university staff and students.* University administrators and staff members who are charged with protecting the rights of all students must have the support, resources, and training they need to effectively address the issues and concerns that directly impact Jewish student life on campus. Training for staff and students must offer a full understanding of antisemitism, along with its multiple manifestations and the troubling ways in which antisemitism from the right and left can often intersect.

We believe that these measures will help improve the current situation at UMass Amherst, allowing you to move forward in the right direction as an academic institution that honors free expression and open inquiry while ensuring that all individuals and communities feel valued, welcomed, and respected. We are available to further discuss these recommendations with you, to share with you our expertise, and the best practices that we have developed for advancing Israel literacy, recognizing and countering antisemitism, and ensuring academic freedom and free speech on campus.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Sincerely yours,



Mark G. Yudof  
Chair, Advisory Board  
(510) 409-2484  
[mark@academicengagement.org](mailto:mark@academicengagement.org)



Miriam F. Elman  
Executive Director  
(315) 956-0725  
[miriam@academicengagement.org](mailto:miriam@academicengagement.org)



Michael B. Atkins  
Deputy Executive Director  
(202) 774-5816  
[mike@academicengagement.org](mailto:mike@academicengagement.org)